

Bomb victims to get share of tax cuts

By Chris Casteel Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Tax breaks for families of Oklahoma City bombing victims, money for handheld computers for Oklahoma school students and increased federal aid for some school districts were included in bills passed Thursday as Congress rushed to finish its business.

The tax breaks for bombing victim survivors were part of a package written to help families affected by the Sept. 11 and anthrax attacks. Sen. Don Nickles, R-Ponca City, amended the bill several weeks ago to add the Oklahoma families.

"The Senate has worked diligently to provide financial assistance to those who lost loved ones in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11," he said. "Families impacted by the Oklahoma City bombing (in 1995) were no less victims of terrorism and should also receive these benefits." Families of people who died in the Oklahoma City bombing can file amended returns, and the In——See , Page 6-A

——ternal Revenue Service would provide guidance to those who need it, Nickles said. The families would be retroactively exempt from 1994 and 1995 income taxes. A special rule would provide a minimum benefit of \$10,000 for each victim.

Moreover, the legislation would shield up to \$8.5 million in assets from the federal estate tax and up to \$3 million from the Oklahoma estate tax.

The spending bill for the federal Education Department includes \$1 million to provide handheld computers to Oklahoma students, another \$1 million to improve Internet service in Ponca City and \$650,000 for technology-related projects at Oklahoma State University and the Oklahoma Health Sciences Center.

Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Warr Acres, who sought the money, said the \$1 million federal grant for handheld computers adds to earlier funds, and will be overseen by state school officials and the University of Central Oklahoma in Edmond.

The handheld computers are to be purchased for about \$200 each, meaning 5,000 uppergrade students may receive a personal handheld, Istook's office said.

"This helps Oklahoma to take a unique lead using this technology," Istook said. "Those who jump in first will enjoy the most benefits. Our students will be better prepared for high-paying work, and more businesses will be attracted to Oklahoma if we're on the cutting edge of technology."

Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Tulsa, said the bill also includes a \$6.7 million — or 23 percent — increase in impact aid for Oklahoma schools. The aid is given to school districts near military bases or other federal land that is exempt from local property taxes.

Inhofe, who has been trying the last few years to get the aid increased, said the bill has a \$137 million hike for schools across the nation.

"This is a major victory on the road to fully funding the program," he said.

Rep. Wes Watkins, R - Stillwater, got some of his top tax priorities passed by the House in the

stimulus package, but the Senate failed to take up the legislation.

One of Watkins' contributions to the bill would extend the tax breaks for businesses on former American Indian lands. He said the provisions would save the businesses about \$2 billion over the life of the tax break and could encourage the location of a \$5 billion power plant. The tax incentive is set to expire at the end of 2003. Watkins' language would extend it for a year.